

INTERVIEWEE: BERNIE PEARL

INTERVIEWER: Victor Cohen

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VICTOR COHEN: Just for the record, it's the fourteenth of November, 2009. I'm speaking with Bernie Pearl here in Long Beach. So you were saying you were the youngest of five?

BERNIE PEARL: Yeah, I'm the youngest of five. Both of my parents were born in East Europe. My mother came over as a very young child, and my father later, although he was reticent to talk about anything. She came from an orthodox family and regarded the U.S. as the Goldene Medina. And my father came from a left-wing socialist background, and my understanding is that he actually had to flee Odessa after the 1905 revolution, because his father was a revolutionary. He's gone, and anybody _____ different is gone.

So it was a curious mix in our house. They both loved music, but it was not a cultural house. He was a very blue collar worker and a lot of politics. The children – my sister was the oldest – were always interested in music, especially my sister Bernice, who just passed away, and Ed were very avid about folk music when it started coming out with Pete Seeger and Burl Ives. Those recordings were around. As part of those early releases, there was also some blues, or music that I now regard as blues. There were little bits from Leadbelly. I heard Brownie McGee on some of those recordings, Josh White, that type of thing. So I was

aware of all those different things in music, and I had no idea if I belonged in it or not. I was a kid, I was the youngest.

My sister would hold hootenannies at her house in the early fifties. She had a house and was young married. As I remember, people would come over on Fridays or Saturdays, or both, and twenty, thirty, forty people would sit around the living room strumming the few chords we all knew. Part of that was Bess Hawes was kind of the mentor of the UCLA Folk Song Club, which Ed was involved in starting. He was at UCLA at the time. So she added a little bit. You know who she is. Bess Hawes.

VC: I've heard the name.

BP: She's from the Lomax family, Bess Lomax Hawes, so she comes from that line of Lomaxes speak only to Seegers. But she was wonderful, and she's still living. But she was quite wonderful and giving and shared her experiences, and her little bit of knowledge of guitar was more than anybody else knew, so I took a lesson from her.

VC: So, did no one play guitar that you knew? Like, growing up it was not a –

BP: No, no. At least the way I tell the story now, the way I remember it is, we had moved from Boyle Heights to West Adams. And while we were there I think Ed was going to UCLA, and the Folk Song Club found a deal for like a dozen guitar – set a real deep discount. A dozen Mexican guitars with little caterpillar things on them. They had eleven buyers and they needed a twelfth, and I was the twelfth. That's kind of – who knows if that's true. But that's the way I remember it. And got me a little Mexican guitar with the inappropriate metal strings and started

evolving that way. I was listening to anything that came out, Burl Ives in particular. I liked his singing and I got his songbook and learned chords from that.

Meanwhile, as a kind of a side thing, we were living in West Adams as it was transitioning from a Jewish to a black neighborhood, and I remember very clearly, on Saturday nights, right across the street on West Boulevard, above the cleaners was a Jewish war veterans hall where there were blues dances. I don't know who played there, and I've talked to many people, they don't remember the place. I swear on my soul that I would lay there at night and listen to what I now recognize as blues, or rhythm and blues electric stuff. I don't know if it was once or a hundred times. I don't remember. That impressed me.

In high school there was a black guy who had a band, and they played, did a concert for everybody. Now, I remember the school as being very mixed. I went to my fiftieth reunion and there were very few black people in my class, but I remember that it was mixed. I know the neighborhood was changing, and there was what I now know was a rhythm and blues band. What's the guy's name? Bobby something. He's still living. He lives back East. And he did a concert. He was a teenager, he was a school guy. And they did a concert of what was electric rhythm and blues at the time, at the high school. That impressed me, I really liked it. There was this folk music here with the union songs and Woody Guthrie, and there was this other thing there, too.

At the end of high school I went to Israel for a year and worked on a kibbutz. During that time, Ed opened the Ash Grove, towards the end of that year, 1958.

VC: So you were abroad in '58 as an eighteen-year-old.

BP: Yeah, seventeen to eighteen. And prior to that, he had put on a couple folk song concerts. I forget where it was. Frank Hamilton, Guy Carawan, Jack Elliott. As a kind of lead-in, as I saw it. And as I remember, I loaned him some money for those and never got paid back. I had a little bit of money because I was going to Israel. I got paid back many-fold by the experience.

When I came back, it was maybe October or September, September I think, of '58, because I got back in time to register for City College, he had started and I, during that first couple of months, met Brownie McGee. I approached him about lessons and went up to Ed's wife's house and took lessons from Brownie. Sonny had nothing else to do, so we sat in the kitchen, and he would play his harp while we were doing lessons. So that was my first blues lessons, in '58.

VC: Did you know that was what you wanted to do?

BP: I had no idea. I mean, it was like, I just liked it, and I really hadn't thought about the implications of it. I was still trying to learn a little finger picking, and strumming mainly. That progressed, and the next – oh, I remember see Jesse Fuller. I never actually imagined I would play like Jesse. You know about Jesse.

VC: I don't.

BP: Okay. Jesse Fuller was originally from Georgia, and, according to his story, he had to get out because he sassed a white man, and he ended up – he did railroad work and carnivals and God knows what – ended up in Oakland. I don't know if Ed knew Barbara – I think probably came through Barbara Dane at the time. He came down, and he was a one-man band. He played an amplified twelve-string. He

invented an electric bass that he played with his right foot. He took off his shoe and there was like a little swivel, and his heel would go bomp, bomp, and his toe would go bomp, bomp, bomp on the bass. That was amplified. There was a little either a scraper or a cymbal on the side of the – so his left foot would – the bass would go bomp, and the cymbal would go chh bomp, chh bomp, chh bomp. The thing was going like that. He had a harmonica on a rack and a kazoo next to that. It was like – I was shortly back from Israel, and there was a moment when I was sitting there with another Zionist friend of mine from the Zionist Youth Movement that we all grew up in, including Ed. (chuckles)

VC: That's right.

BP: That's right. We were sitting there, and it was a – Jesse Fuller was on the bill, and there was some other more popular – maybe Bud and Travis – local folk song group. You know, this is 1958 and the folk thing was just kind of becoming something. So there were folk groups and they had popularity, and Ed, very early on, had that policy of exposing people to other things. Rather than finding two folk groups, he'd put on Jesse Fuller and, let's say, Bud and Travis. So the audience – it was very full, a very hot place at the time. The place was packed. Two hundred people sitting around, drinking their maraschinos. There was no beer, there was no wine, I don't think. No, there was not beer and wine at the time. Drinking their coffees and all that. Eating their frappe ice creams and all that stuff. And they had a little cheese plate.

I was sitting with my buddy and maybe somebody else, and I was not that – I don't think I had yet washed a dish there, because I immediately, within a couple

of weeks of coming back, went to work there. So this must have been my first exposure to real live blues.

Jesse Fuller starts playing, and I go apeshit. It's like, Oh my God. The music (mouths some unintelligible melody), and it was all this culture thing. They were talking about working on the railroad. And the rhythm just absolutely drew me. It was literally the drummer. I remember my friend Lonnie, who was also a musician, a little bit younger than me, but we were both pounding the table. And then I looked around. The folk audience was totally uninterested. They were talking to each other. And I'm going, Oh. That was my first signal that I just viscerally responded to that music. I never thought I would play that event, didn't have any ambition to do what Jesse Fuller was doing, but it just drew me away.

And I saw that the people who liked the general folk song thing were not of the same mindset, and that just more and more grew. Even alienation grew. I was still doing folk songs and doing a little bit of country. Country stuff was starting to become more known, even through, let's say, the New Lost City Ramblers. This is all before those rediscoveries, before they found Roscoe Holcomb and Clarence Ashley and then, God forbid, Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs, that whole thing that opened up of the traditional white music.

VC: So that hadn't happened yet.

BP: No.

VC: Right at this point.

BP: No. And it hadn't happened with the blues guys, either. But Barbara also brought Lightnin' in, in 1959 or '60, and that was it for me. I mean, his flashy rings, and

just the ambience. He had a gold tooth and the stage lights shined off the gold tooth like a star burst. That's my image of it. He was a magnificent musician and very accessible as a human being. Me and my friend David and Barry, who is now Dr. Demento –

VC: Barry Hansen.

BP: Barry Hansen. Decided we were going to take a lesson. Barry was a folklore student, so he knew who Lightnin' Hopkins was. He knew he was somebody of importance. Barry didn't play guitar, he was a pianist. He didn't play guitar, but he decided he wanted – three of us got together. I think we gave him twenty dollars each for a lesson. I was interested in the guitar and David was interested in the guitar, and while we took the lesson Barry was interviewing him. Actually, somewhere Barry has a tape of that. He sent me a tape of that lesson, the lesson with Lightnin'.

David was very quick. He picked up stuff right away. I'm much slower, and I picked up a little bit, but I stayed with it and I started – when people would come out to the Ash Grove they would come out for several days at a time. It was not a single night or even two nights. They were there for four or five, six days, some of them, especially in the early days. It was residencies. He was staying – I forget where he was staying. I'm not sure if Long Gone was with him that first time or not. The Chambers Brothers had already come out. They were already here from Mississippi, but they were doing gospel at the time. Again, I didn't relate to doing the music, but I loved – I never thought I would be a black gospel singer.

(chuckles) But I absolutely adored the music, and they were great people, too.

They were good guys.

VC: So you were working this entire time at the Ash Grove too?

BP: Yeah, washing dishes. I was going to UCLA. Well, started with LACC, and then in '61 I went to UCLA.

VC: What were you studying?

BP: _____ studies. I stayed like three years, I think, at City College. It was a fun place to be. But I was working. There was a period when – in maybe '59 or '60 – where the Ash Grove was getting their beer and wine license, and I couldn't work there because I wasn't twenty-one, and I couldn't work in the kitchen. So I spent a year learning how move furniture, which was fine. I've used that all my life. (chuckles) So I was washing dishes, seating, greeting. I was learning a little bit about running the light board, a little bit about the sound. I was just generally involved with that.

Then, in the early sixties, at a certain point, the people who were out digging around to find the Clarence Ashleys and the Doc Boggs, which I don't think we ever – I think Doc Boggs had died. But the real rural, the authentic Appalachian people, the authentic blues people who were starting to be discovered. Then, of course, you have the Revelations, Sun House and Skip James and Mississippi John Hurt.

Mance Lipscomb was actually fairly early because he was not one of the rediscoveries, he was just a flat-out discovery at the time. He didn't know he was lost. (chuckles) Apparently, the story with Mance was his nephew T Lipscomb had moved from Navasota to Houston and was a pal of Lightnin's, and at a certain

point Mance wrote a song, or started doing the Tom Moore blues, and Tom Moore was a very powerful landowner. At one point, Mance had fled Navasota and he went to Houston, and that's where Lightnin' met him. At a certain point, he went back to Navasota. This was in the fifties.

Then this guy – I think his name was Mac McCormack – was in Houston and started asking around, "Are there any great old style blues players left in the country?" They asked Lightnin' and he said, "Well, there's this old boy back –" It was Mance Lipscomb. Well, that was the discovery of the century, as far as I'm concerned. To me, it's as significant as Leadbelly, in terms of styles and the amount of music that he brought forward. He had preserved that whole tradition. You can see the look of dumbfoundedness, because I had already not only studied with Lightnin', I was playing with him on stage. I knew it, I knew the blues. I'd studied with Brownie, I was playing with Lightnin'. I met Mance Lipscomb and I started from A again because it was like, whoa, what is going on?

So I got involved viscerally. I mean, it was not a calculation on my part. And, obviously, until fairly recently, I never thought I would be doing that music on my own. But it's like, you know, they're all gone. I actually did learn directly from them by studying with them and playing with them and listening to their records intensely and over a very long period of time, trying to absorb the feel of the music. And at a certain point, I just said – because I was primarily a backup player. I did hardly any singing, and the singing I did was atrocious.

And I just had a serious talk with myself about ten years ago, it was like, well, you're sixty years old – actually, that didn't play into it. I was working with

Harmonica Fats. I was doing mainly backup. I was trying to do as traditional a backup as I could for him to give *him* a focus for what *he* was doing. It was a different vision than he had for himself, but it was working, we were getting work. We separated and then he passed away. He got ill and he wanted much more money than anyone was offering, so it was not working for me.

Really, about ten years ago I started thinking seriously about developing my own thing, and I'm glad I did. But I mean, that's kind of, in a nutshell, that journey. But the exposure to the people – Fred McDowell was like Mance in that he was not one of the rediscoveries, he was somebody who had never recorded. I saw his picture, this kind of almost scary looking guy, on the cover of an Alan Lomax album, and there he was. It's like, oh my God. And wonderful people.

VC: And you guys hung out with them.

BP: Oh, yeah.

VC: Ed was telling me you guys would take them around town.

BP: Absolutely. I was still going to school, and I did not have a place for them. Fred McDowell spent one or two nights with me in my little cockroach apartment. But, yeah, we'd hang out, and we'd talk. And it was not about show me this, show me that, it was, you know, talk, talk. I mean, I hate to be esoteric about it, but that's as important as play this lick with this finger. That's like, Oh! You get a sense of the life, and you get the real sense that we are really all one people. We're all concerned about similar things. And these are the elders. As one friend of mine put it, these were the traveling rabbis of our time, and they spread the word of a

different culture, God knows a different background, a different upbringing. But we can talk. We talk the same language. They *could* talk the same language.

To them, it was not – how shall I say? It was not a – there were not barriers. They were real – I know with other people, but the people I was close to were all mentioned. They were all just real people, and they – want to talk? Great. Want to go out? Okay. Want to have a drink? Okay. It was very flexible that way. I didn't feel the strain. Now, what they felt inside – but I didn't feel constrained not to ask them anything. I would say anything. I'd ask Sonny and Terry about black and white relations in the South. Mance Lipscomb would share about his upbringing and what he thought. So, for me, it's music and the humanity involved.

VC: Was it ever weird being like a white Jewish kid from L.A. playing this stuff, backing these bands? Not that it would be, but I'm just kind of – I guess part of the Ash Grove I think is so interesting is how it was just kind of a really interesting crossroads for people.

BP: The Ash Grove being next to Fairfax High, which was *the* Jewish high school in L.A. – now it's no longer that, but – a lot of the kids who would come in were Jewish, most all. Others came in from out of the area. I try to think if I had gone to Como, Mississippi, and tried to be friends with Fred McDowell in that way, I would not have been as comfortable going to where he plays, but he probably would just welcome me in, whereas I felt, in a sense – people say, Where are you from? You don't look from you're from Louisiana. Where'd you learn the music? Did you go down South. No, the down South came to me. They were like in my

house. So that particular tension of going into the other place, the other world was not there.

One time I was invited to play at a function at one of my temple member's house. Somebody asked me, "Well, do people ever say anything about you being white?" And I said, "No. Generally speaking, the black people that I have played for and played with judged by the music. It's the white people that are more uncomfortable with it." Interesting question. I've played with lots of black musicians, and many of them are very vocal about how white people misplay the music. But what I found, if you're playing it right, if your heart's in the right place, it won't be like, white boy, you didn't play good, or Jew boy, you didn't play good, it's like, well, try it this way. It was that kind of thing.

The other factor which played into it, especially with the older musicians, they were deeply concerned that their community and their families had rejected their old-fashioned music. It was Lightnin', Mance, _____, all of them were very concerned. So I think to a great extent they recognized that if their music was going to live on, it was guys like me who were going to carry it on. Grant you that I don't feel I invented the music and I don't own the music and I'm willing to show what I know to anybody, but as far as they knew, their communities had passed on them.

When I went to Navasota in 1973 to visit Mance, I showed up, went to his house, and the first thing he did was take me to the juke joint or barrel house in town that had told him his music was too old-fashioned, they didn't want him to play anymore. The first thing he did was take me there. See that picture of Mance

with the hat? Well, that's Mance. "This is Mr. Bernie from California." "Oh, how do you do." He introduced me to the owner. "Yeah, he come all the way from California to visit me." It's like, okay, I don't need to say anymore.

Their communities – within the community there were people – when I was with Mance there was a black man who would show up to take lessons from him, who liked that music. He was not as old as Mance, but he was older than I. He was from the community and he wanted to learn that. He was recognized as an avatar, or a person who could really do it. But they all expressed concern about that, and they were happy. You'd hear Muddy Waters talk, "Well, how do you feel about Eric Clapton making all this money?" and Muddy would say – and there has to be probably a reserve of – not so much resentment, not resentment at Eric Clapton, resentment that their music was not allowed in their time to be played for everybody. But they'd say, No, that's great. Eric Clapton played, but he does my songs, and now many of the young white people are asking for Muddy Waters. So to a certain extent it was good P.R.

That's one of the reasons I've stayed involved all the years is there's so many aspects to it. It's multifaceted and at all the different levels you can think of, the human, political, social, economic, cultural, kickass guitar level. There's a funny story about Buddy Guy was invited to play a concert with Clapton in England, and Clapton was already very well known. He had known and respected Buddy Guy, but Buddy was the underdog. So Buddy asked him, "Are you going to get out there and cut my head?" And Eric said, "No, no, no." He said, "You better because I'm

going to cut *your* head." (both laugh) It's like, hey man, let's get it on. (both laugh)

VC: Ed told me that you and David had an Ash Grove School of Music.

BP: Yeah.

VC: What was that about?

BP: We started, basically inspired by John Cohen of the New Lost City Ramblers. Are you familiar with what they did and what their approach –

VC: Not so much, no. The little bit I heard from Ed, but –

BP: They were city guys. John Cohen, Mike Seeger, the half brother of Seeger but from the Seeger family, and a guy named Tom Paley, who was a mathematics professor in Columbia or something, and later another guy replaced him. They started listening to the old traditional – all the different brother groups, the Gilmore Brothers and Bill Monroe and Doc Boggs, and they would do pretty exact replications of white music, white mountain music, with a little bit of blues, a little bit of finger picking. It was certainly not dead, it was very alive, and they essentially brought it to life, before they found Clarence Ashley and Doc Watson, and so forth.

John said, "Well, you know, back East people are starting to do that with blues." With them as an example, learning the music exactly and correctly, in my mind anyway, the idea was to learn it exactly and correctly and do it live, make it real. So we started a school of traditional folk music. There was a beginning lesson, but it was all based on the traditional music that was coming in week by week to the Ash Grove.

VC: And it was really like just a non-stop flow of traditional folk and blues.

BP: Yeah, pretty much. Toward the end of the sixties, I was in my late twenties, I was starting to want to stretch out. I was kind of weary of the scene, not of the music or the people, but I just – I didn't look forward to being there every single night.

VC: But you've been there probably most nights for the last decade.

BP: Yeah. So I less and less hung around, and of course, as the Vietnam War dragged on, and various other political things were happening, Ed turned more towards a political orientation. The good stuff was still coming in, but the place had lost its real focus, as far as I'm concerned. Part of it was the times. But it was an expression always of Ed's ideas, primarily. I know he likes to consider himself a democrat, in a small *d*, democratic, equal. But his ideas. He had to dominate, which he did, and I think it's fine. It's art by dictatorship rather than by committee, which is the way it's supposed to be done. My ideas. Period.

So I became less and less involved. I was not involved with the political scene. He hired people to run the place and work at the place who were more politically oriented than musically. Everything had changed, of course, through the sixties. The sixties was dead by the end of the sixties. So it lasted on until the early seventies. And there weren't so many great discoveries. For God's sake, disco was becoming popular, of all things. (chuckles) So things had changed, as you can expect they would. I would hang in and occasionally I'd get a call to come and play something, but I was not hustling dishes or seating people or making cappuccinos or anything.

VC: Right. When you were doing the music school, how would that work, just on a kind of nuts and bolts level?

BP: We had teachers and we met – I think it was on primarily Sunday. Sundays we'd do the classes. We'd have different rooms in the place. There weren't that many rooms, but at different times slots. We paid Ed a percentage. And that's how it went.

VC: How many people came, do you think?

BP: Fifty to a hundred, I think. It was banjo, and Taj Mahal would do a Mississippi slide class, and Mark Libby would teach a country class. David taught finger picking, and I taught a basic class. Each of us had different – I don't know if we ever had a mandolin, but there was harmonica.

VC: Who came to the classes?

BP: People who were coming to the Ash Grove.

VC: Who was coming to the Ash Grove, at that point? I guess from like the time you were involved through when you stopped.

BP: Well, initially, you had the folk crowd, people who were into folk music. I think some of it was from the old Left hootenanny people for whom Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger were idols and icons. Then you had groups like the Limelighters and Bud and Travis, and whatever the groups were. Some more popular, less political groups came through. You had a certain amount of folk music fans, because folk music was big. In the early sixties, folk music was the thing, girl folk singers, and so forth. The more Ed went towards the traditional music, the less of those people came in.

Younger people came in. A show might be Mance Lipscomb opening for the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band. Again that policy of giving something authentic and something derivative or nouveau, or whatever. Younger people came in, who were really interested in kickass playing and the Birds, Canned Heat, Taj, Ry Cooder. So the crowd had changed. I think, to a certain extent, the Troubador picked up the slack. They did much less of the traditional music and more of the, you know, Hoyt Axton and popular groups of the time.

VC: Would you get older folks coming in to see people like Mance Lipscomb, or like Doc Watson, or the old fogies?

BP: No. It was college, high school, younger people. When Bill Monroe and Flatt and Scruggs would be there, you would get a certain amount of the older southern music fans coming in. But the Ash Grove was a place where you could pick up Black Panther literature. It was not the kind of bar that the pickup truck crowd, if there is such a thing, would be attracted to. It was not cross-cultural in that way. But, yeah, you did have that mix.

One classic show, which I think I missed, was just – I'm sorry I missed it. Ed put on Doc Watson and Johnny Guitar Watson together. Johnny Guitar Watson had predominately a middle-aged black crowd, and Doc Watson had a predominately white crowd and, to a great extent, a lot of southern whites. So Johnny Guitar Watson would go on and all the whites would leave. (both laugh)

VC: That's amazing.

BP: So, anyway, there's stories like that. But it was a tremendous place to see what was relevant in American traditional music. There were other things that went on, too.

He put on Pharoah Sanders. Mary _____, her L.A. debut was there. So it was not strictly all that. But it became more and more hardcore traditional music place where you could hear the great black performers of the twenties and thirties who were still alive, and you could hear Clarence Ashley and then, of course, Doc Watson was one of the young guys.

VC: Really.

BP: Yeah. Doc was the backup for Clarence Ashley. He was in the band. He was not featured. It became pretty clear as soon as he started playing that he was something to deal with. But the first couple times out, he was just part of the band. Not just, but it was a four-piece band and they were magnificent, they were great. But it became real clear that Doc was going to be a star. Stanley Brothers. I remember going into the Ash Grove dressing room when Bill Monroe was playing – and the Ash Grove was the place where the Freedom Singers would play and SNCC and CORE, the civil rights groups were centered there at the Ash Grove – but Bill would come in and play, and I went into the dressing room, and there was his hat sitting on a shelf. I looked and on the inside of the brim there was a Never button.

VC: "Never" meaning?

BP: Never integrate. That's what I interpret it.

VC: Right. Ed told me some story about one musician like that. They were going down somewhere in L.A. and got pulled over, and the guy said something to the cop that was like what you would say down South, like some crazy – I forget exactly the comment, but Ed was saying you never heard someone be so openly racist like that.

And it was just a peculiar, you know, strange crowd like that. I'll have to look it up.

BP: Was it a white guy or black?

VC: He was a white guy.

BP: He said something to a cop?

VC: Right. Like, don't treat me like a black person.

BP: Don't treat me like a nigger?

VC: Yeah, something like that.

BP: That was a level that certainly was there, but when – here's a funny one. Ed might have told you this. You know who Roscoe Holcomb was?

VC: Yeah.

BP: He was at the first or the second UCLA Folk Festival. I was tangential. I was in the other room, and my wife was playing something on a CD, and I'm listening to it. Oh, God damn, that's the closest to _____ Jefferson I have ever heard in my life. I walked in and looked, and it was Roscoe Holcomb. I'll be damned. I really never connected that, but he was doing blues, real redneck, hillbilly, mountain – anyway, there was always this apprehension. You had Lightnin' and Mance, and you had Bill Monroe, and you had all these whites and blacks who were from the South, and I was expecting some racial thing to happen. This was during the start of the civil rights, where people were still getting killed and lynched and beaten. There were no laws. So that was going on, aside from the Vietnam, which was just starting to take off.

Anyway, Roscoe Holcomb played solo. He got up on stage and started playing his guitar. And he stopped. He started tuning it and he said, "You know what the difference between a white man and a colored man is?" And everybody went (breathes in). "A white man tune himself to death and a colored man play himself to death." (both laugh) That was something. But I remember that moment. It was like, oh, my God. He is going to say it.

VC: Right. Here it comes. What do you think was it about the blues, the music, that pulled you in, as opposed to the country style?

BP: Well, I can hear now in the country stuff that I was not drawn to what is attractive about it. Many of the same things that I found in blues. Initially, just like the Jesse Fuller example, I loved the feel and the rhythm. Danceable. You start listening to the words and it's like reality. And, of course, the scale that real blues singers use is just so exotic.

VC: What do you mean?

BP: It really is old country, it really is African. The tones – I can't reproduce those tones. Every so often I'll hit something just from seeing it and I'll say, "Boy, that sounds pretty good, feels pretty good." The connection between the emotion and the musical scale, the rhythm. And as I went on, the mastery of the music, the mastery of the instrument is very disguised.

VC: What do you mean? I've studied a little bit so I kind of – I've heard enough music so I might get _____ for what you're saying, but –

BP: Trying to get the sound that, let's say, a John _____ gets. He didn't do any chords at all. Just to see him play the right hand looked completely random and basic and

untrained. Try and get that sound. Here's the guitar, there's the amp. Go. Get that. And that's at the most basic level. He was a very basic player. If you can get that sound, if you can get that feel. Then you'd get into people like Mance, and you get into someone like Lightnin'. Lightnin' was just a creative genius. You try and play that music – I can play just about every lick he played. You play it with that flow and you invent it as you're playing it. That's brilliant improvisation. Tones and – I find I like the drama of it, I like the rawness of it, I like the directness of the words, the fun involved. And at its most deep levels, I am always moved by the depth of emotion and feeling and history that comes out in it.

I'm dabbling on the outer limits of it, but my premise was always to do the music, be creative, and still be yourself. Take off those goddam shades, get off that stupid hat, and please don't talk with a southern accent, unless it's real. That's kind of like in the pit of my stomach. That's how I look at people who are playing music. If it's direct, if it's real, great. If you're putting on something, please don't expect me to respect what you do.

VC: A lot of the blues, it might not necessarily be religious, but there's a religious spiritual element to it. Did that ever –

BP: Oh, it became very clear, both in the traditional white players and black players, that they normally would do at least one spiritual and would not shy away from it. Generally. There would always be one or two religious tunes. It's very common in bluegrass, it's a formula. But that's pretty true. It's part of the total music.

That's another thing. I played at the Mance Lipscomb Festival last year in Navasota, and I was asked to deliver a few words about Mance. It was at a church,

and they did what they called a blues service. It was a religious service. There was a preacher who spoke. It was very nice. And in the recreation hall, or the social room, I was speaking and I said Mance Lipscomb, and all the blues players I knew, were Christians, and most of the people around them were Jewish. They never tried to proselytize. If they tell you about Jesus, they're telling you about what they think. Or if they talk about church or religion, they tell you about *their* feeling. But they never try to – now you, you're going to go to hell. They were not that type. But they were all Christians in one way or another. Some of them went to church and some of them didn't, and some of them were skeptical about religion, or ambivalent. Sun House was – you know.

VC: Right. That never put you off, or it never got in the way for you?

BP: No. Earlier this year, I was a presenter at a Jewish convention called Limmud. It's a place in Orange County. I was billed as a Jewish man plays the blues, and one of the songs that I had been doing a lot was a version of the Titanic called "God Moves on the Water," and there's a verse about Jesus in there. I didn't feel any self-consciousness about it. I mentioned it to the audience and they said to go on and play it, which I did. I don't have to believe – like I like to say, I never shot anybody, I never whupped my woman till I was satisfied, I never chopped cotton, but – you know, you don't have to have lived that to sing about it. But I will grant you that someone like Lightnin' or Mance who may not have – actually, Lightnin' was on a chain gang – but Mance said, "I never had a day in jail, I never had any problems." But when he sings about going to jail, or he sings about boss man, you know it's for real.

I think you have to – as one guy put it many years ago, a black guy I was talking to, and I said, "You know, I don't feel quite right about singing this." He said, "You're an actor. You have to imagine that you're – you have to imagine it. You don't have to say, Oh Lawd." But those are things I deal with all the time, am I comfortable with this concept or these words, or that kind of thing. So I just kind of continue to work my way into the material.

VC: Was that also one of the things that attracted you to it, the fact that what they were singing about was – like you said earlier, like reality?

BP: Oh, yeah. The stuff I grew up with, nothing wrong with being Crosby and Doris Day and Rudy Vallee and all that stuff, but when you can sing "big fat mama with the meat shaking on the bone, every time she shimmy, skinny woman lose her home." I mean, come on! (laughs) That is so violently funny.

I love it, and I don't mean to put it to the exclusion of the value of all other music, but I really like – I'm very attracted to exotic music. I am somewhat put off by music that is meant to entertain. I know, everybody in blues, if you're out there playing it for money, you're trying to entertain people, but for the entertainment to be the main focus rather than the musicianship and a command of the poetry is – you know. So I tend to avoid popular – I'll hear something and I'll say, "Yeah, that's kind of nice," and this and that. The next thing you know, _____.

VC: That would be the difference between someone like Bud and Travis, right? And then Jesse Fuller.

BP: I'm not sure of that. They were very much into the interpretation of Mexican music, too. It was not cutsey, you know, it was not cute. They were pretty serious about their approach to that.

VC: I wanted to ask you about the Ash Grove, from talking to Ed I get the impression that early on it wasn't just – even though it became this center for folk music, as we might think of it now, with Appalachian folk music or folk blues, before that, _____, it seemed really much more diverse in terms of the kinds of music it would have, like people would come through. Like you said, there would be flamenco or –

BP: Well, it stayed that way, though. It didn't *just* become – people who loved blues knew that as the place to go see blues, but if you go on a different night, you're going to see flamenco or a Scottish bagpipe group or _____ playing North African _____. So the variety really maintained.

VC: Really. So the whole way through.

BP: Yeah. I think what got cut out was cute stuff, the folk songs that – in quotes, "folk music." It was no long a folk music place. I could be contradicted by looking at the list of who played when. But it was also a place where young people could put their groups together and play for a crowd, an audience. David Lindley and Richard Green and Ry Cooder and Taj Mahal and myself and Steve Mann. We had a place where we could get up there and play, as we were developing. And as people put – like Canned Heat was put together. Nitty Gritty Dirt Band, I don't know if they were put together there, but that was one of the first places they played.

VC: Was that one of the first places for Canned Heat?

BP: It was put together there. That was the place where they were allowed to play. The Birds also essentially started there. That was another important thing. It was an outlet. It was fairly uneven, but some pretty significant people got their start there.

VC: Was there a lot of presence of the record companies there ever?

BP: I don't know about that. Ed was very easy to offend show business people. And the record companies I think gravitated to the Troubadour. They were very business friendly. Ed was not. And I don't know, because I know he was approached by different people, but people came up with – I can imagine the reception of people talking about product and that kind of thing. I wasn't in on that end of it.

VC: From what I've heard, there wasn't – like you said, it would have been a different club.

BP: It would have been a different club. There were people who knew him and could get along with him, but it was not the show business place.

VC: Did it surprise you that it got burned down a couple times? I mean, surprise isn't the right word, but I mean I guess –

BP: Well, honestly, I thought that management was always lax, and public safety was lax. I would not have been surprised to find that it was a burning cigarette butt in a trashcan that actually caused at least one of the blazes. On the other hand, when you're the focus of pro-Fidel Castro and you're the focus of the Black Panthers, there are lots of people who would like to see you dead in the street. I also buy that. But it was not run as a club business. He was on a mission.

In the early days, yeah, it was *the* place in town that people flocked in and gladly paid their three and four dollars, but after a short while it became much more intense and much more – to my benefit, to everybody's benefit, it became that place where you brought Sun House, who would put Bukka White on for a week. But, yeah, it was not run as a business, it was not run as a nightclub business.

VC: I think that was kind of what made it so cool.

BP: It was cool and it was intense, and it was not a place for everybody.

VC: What do you mean by that?

BP: Well, it's, Oh, let's go to the Ash Grove, let's go and have a little drink. This is not a destination for a couple in the Valley who wants a nice night out. On the other hand, if you're a redneck and you want to see some hillbilly shit, that's where you went. You just put up with all that other left-wing Commie shit. It was a place where young people would gravitate to just see, oh my God, Sun House? Well, the twenty people in L.A. who knew who Sun House was, they were there for Sun House. It was not a date destination for the general population after awhile. When it was folk music and it was all mixed in with this other stuff, great. But as it became more focused on what we'll call traditional music, it was not for everyone.

VC: I was reading on your website about the Blues Festival in Long Beach. Was the Ash Grove a template for you at all as you were thinking about that?

BP: Well, it was not a template, but, in essence, my love of the blues came from the Ash Grove, came from what I learned there. And my idea of what kind of atmosphere I wanted, I guess that came as much from myself. But what the Blues Festival was supposed to be, to a great extent, was built at the Ash Grove.

Although he didn't do a festival of that kind. The kind of music I wanted there was the kind that I heard at the Ash Grove, and that's been kind of my downfall ever since, because I was spoiled. My standard was Brownie McGee and Lightnin' Hopkins and Fred McDowell and Freddie King and Albert King, and if you're doing something lesser, nice try. As everybody is doing. So I kind of am hardnosed about competence and authenticity.

VC: Do you find a lot of people playing blues?

BP: There's something that they play that, for the most part, largely doesn't please me. But you run across people occasionally who are doing something – and it's not a matter of – and I am not a real big fan of imitation. I think that's a step along the road. I'm also not a fan of diluting music, taking away the values that I saw in the blues players and the blues playing, and the meaning of it, the getting across of the feeling and the message. The diluting of that, the making of it into some kind of a finger dance on the guitar or piano, or how flashy you could be, doesn't please me either. But when you run across somebody who's doing it right, it's wonderful.

Right now I'm in a phase of going to blues festival websites so I can send an email to them asking for work. It's astounding how many blues festivals do not have a single black performer on them. Part of it is, some of the performers who would qualify are too expensive for some festivals. But at the local level, you do not have much black involvement. There are pockets, certainly in Chicago and Memphis you can find black groups. The thing that's called blues, you're likely not to see a lot of blues at a blues festival.

VC: What do you make of that?

BP: I really don't know. I was a judge at the blues competition in Memphis, I went down there. It's a voluntary thing. I went there just to make contacts. The blues competition took place up and down Beale Street, so they have this and that. I was a judge in the acoustic – it was called solo and duo. I think on our stage there was one black performer, and on the other stage that I went to the next night, it was one black performer. Neither of them were even close to blues. From Alabama. Most of the people I saw, it's like, Who told you that what you're doing is blues?

VC: What were they playing? What did it sound like?

BP: It was R&B, it was hillbilly, it was – where is Lightnin' Hopkins, where is Robert Johnson, where is Sun House? There was Stevie Ray Vaughn on the acoustic guitar, and that was about as close as most of them got. However, the one guy who was playing it won. What message do you get? There were some black groups that played, more electric. I saw the acoustic stuff. In conjunction with the blues competition, they do like almost an industry get together luncheon for the Keeping the Blues Alive Awards, and this is for people in the press, or the manager of the year, or blues radio, or the Blues Society. I sat in that hall and I could count on one hand the number of black faces, and I knew a couple of them. I went up to one and I said, "Where's the black folks? What are we going to do to get black folks involved?" He said, "We're working on it." I said, "Well, keep me involved."

Barry Hansen predicted way back, he said, "Well, the way blues is going, it's likely to become like a Dixieland convention. It's going to be all white people doing black music." And that has come to be true. Now, I am a fine one to speak (chuckles). My attempt has been to play the music as authentically as possibly, and

authentic from the inside because that's where the music comes from. I don't know that I have made any outreach, other than on radio, to the black public to get more black people involved.

But the answer is, I don't know what to make of it. I wouldn't know what I would do about it. I was as much concerned, and maybe more concerned, with the Stevie Ray Vaughanization of the blues guitar. Everybody, including black performers, are doing it. If you're under forty or fifty, you're playing Stevie Ray Vaughan. You're competing. You're going away from what I consider the essence of the music.

So that's kind of the state of the blues, and I'm not the right guy to – I mean, I don't know. I am the right guy to ask about what to do about it, and my answer is I don't know. My answer is to reeducate the public, take all these people who are doing that music and put them in education camps. (both laugh) Where they have to listen to the real thing. And take lectures.

VC: Right. The description of the Ash Grove, it was a lot of white kids listening to the old black folks playing.

BP: Yes.

VC: And that generation has kind of grown up. I think it's interesting.

BP: It is interesting, you know, with the older black guys, they're music was twenty, thirty, forty years out of date with the black public. But for us, it's great, it's new, it's brilliant. These guys are wonderful guys. Let's go. We're going for it. It's unusual. There are some younger black people playing the music, and of course doing great things with it. But to try and reeducate the black public and say, This is

your music and your heritage. Well, in certain circles, yeah, in the intellectual circles it's recognized.

VC: You started the first blues program at KPCC? Is that right?

BP: No. The first time I went on was at KPPC, which was the first FM underground station in L.A. It was out of Pasadena. I was on for a couple of years. I made no air checks. I interviewed almost everybody alive except Muddy and – I don't know who else. There was one other significant blues artist of the time. Everybody else came on the show. I stopped doing that. It's pretty vague, but I did that for two years. And then I went on at KLON in 1980, and what I played was what I liked. I had a tremendous black audience. Grant you, it was thirty years ago, but these were, to a great extent, southerners who missed that music like the devil. When we did the first festival in 1980, what I saw was an audience that reflected generally the demographics of Southern California. Lots of Chicanos, lots of blacks, lots of whites, lots of different ages. And I said, "This is what I want. This is what I'm for. This is what I'm about. This is the legacy coming home."

And I continued to play the music I like, predominately black artists, and not all old. At the time, you had some pretty hot guitar players playing, and the music was growing, _____ was still out there. So my job, at least for a three hour show, was pretty clear. Very intense for those three hours. Then they went to four or five hours Saturday and Sunday, and I only did that for less than a year. You have to play much more, let's say eight to ten hours. Three hours was very intense, and that was the tail that wagged the dog. That's the show that everybody listened to. When I went to the two day format, you can't be that intense for that long.

There's not that much great blues. And you can't go playing two and three hours of brilliant prewar acoustic blues, you'd lose your audience. So I played a lot of other stuff, too, stuff I was not crazy about, but it was good, acceptable.

I don't know that I'd be able to do that now. I think a lot of what people play on the air is what the record companies send them. And most of what I've heard doesn't really belong. It's not great blues, it's not even good blues, and in a lot of cases it's not even blues. So I do an Internet radio show and I just play the stuff I like. No one has asked me to do another radio show, broadcast show, but I would be hard pressed to do more than three hours, and really put out the music that I feel needs to be put out and deserves to be put out there. I think that, to a certain extent, is the key to building an audience, of all types.

Generally, when you go to a blues show it's older white people, but you play stuff that younger people can respond to, and you play stuff that all – you know, play stuff on the R&B side, which attracts more Latinos. They like the blues, but there's a certain Latino thing. You play some of that Jay McNeely and that stuff and it gets people drawn in. I like all that. I play some _____, get different people hooked in. I don't really keep up with who's hot and who's not. I don't have the records. The record companies don't send me the stuff. And mostly what I play on my show is from my own LP collection. I've got a pretty good CD collection, but a lot of it is repeat artists, if not repeat material.

VC: I'd love to see the LPs. I'm fascinated. I'm going to hit stop.

BP: That's up to you.

[end]